

# GASTOWN

A WALKING TOUR THROUGH HISTORY



THE CITY OF VANCOUVER PLANNING DEPARTMENT

THE B.C. HERITAGE TRUST

THE HERITAGE VANCOUVER SOCIETY

THE VANCOUVER MUSEUM

## WALKING THE TOUR

The tour takes about two hours. Walk the tour during business hours so that you can see interior renovations as well. Many Gastown businesses are open on Sunday for the convenience of tourists. The tour begins at Maple Tree Square at the intersection of Water and Carrall Streets. For information on public transportation to Gastown, telephone TRANSLINK at 521-0400.

*The B.C. Heritage Trust has provided financial assistance to this project to support conservation of our heritage resources, gain further knowledge and increase public understanding of the complete history of British Columbia.*

### For more information about GASTOWN:

*Vancouver: An Illustrated History*  
by Patricia E. Roy (James Lorimer and Company, Toronto, 1980).

*Vancouver: The Way It Was*  
by Michael Kluckner (Whitecap Books, Vancouver, 1984).

*Robin Ward's Vancouver*  
by Robin Ward (Harbour Publishing, 1990).

*The Map of Vancouver Architecture*  
by the Architectural Institute of BC, 1992.

*Exploring Vancouver: The Essential Architectural Guide*  
by Harold Kalman, Ron Phillips and Robin Ward (UBC Press, Vancouver, 1993).

## INTRODUCING GASTOWN

Gastown is the historic centre of the City of Vancouver. Originally a ragtag settlement, Gastown and adjoining land were incorporated as the City of Vancouver in 1886. During the city's boom years, Gastown's location near the wharves and railroad tracks attracted wholesalers and warehouses. By the 1930s however, Gastown was becoming a quiet backwater of deteriorating buildings. It wasn't until the 1960s that the public began to appreciate Gastown's distinctive architecture and role in the city's history and undertake the revitalization of the area. This guide will introduce you to historic Gastown.

Gastown's beginnings sound like a salty tall tale. In 1867 garrulous Captain John "Gassy Jack" Deighton floated a barrel of whiskey ashore on the south side of Burrard Inlet. He persuaded workers from the nearby Hastings Sawmill to build a saloon for him, and days later he was in business. The village of "Gastown", as it became known, was officially surveyed as Granville Townsite in 1870. Its hotels, saloons and shops served the workers of Burrard Inlet sawmills. Then, in 1884, the small village received word that the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) would extend its tracks to Gastown. The railroad promised a grand future for Gastown, and real estate speculators were determined to cash in on it. Speculation forced land prices to increase threefold as lots that sold for \$300 in March 1886 fetched \$900 in May of the same year.



*Cordova Street in 1886, five weeks after the fire which razed Vancouver.*

On June 13, 1886, weeks after Gastown and adjacent lands were incorporated as the City of Vancouver, a clearing fire in Yaletown blazed out of control and in 20 minutes burned the City to the ground. This tragedy was also an opportunity for Vancouver. The city benefitted from

the instant removal of stumps and ramshackle buildings, and especially from the international publicity Vancouver received.

In 1887, the first CPR trains reached Vancouver, and travellers and investors found a thriving city. Gastown's many hotels were crowded with speculators and lumberjacks, miners and would-be millionaires.

A business district that included the Gastown area emerged, roughly following the boundaries set by the 1887 Fire Limit By-law. Within those bounds, all new construction (except sheds and privies) had to be of brick or stone. To generate traffic for the transcontinental, the CPR devised a freight rate structure that favoured Vancouver and began running its own steamships to Asia. Gastown became the transfer point for goods moving in and out of the city by rail and ship.

The Gastown area was one of several competing commercial centres in the city. Another was at the intersection of Hastings and Main Streets. The CPR encouraged a third centre on their land grant to the west. To lure commerce to its area, the CPR built the first Hotel Vancouver at the corner of Granville and Georgia Streets in 1887, and in 1891 erected an opera house behind the hotel.



*Water and Cordova Streets.  
Photo circa 1898.*



*Mule Train headed to the Klondike.  
Photo circa 1898.*

By the 1890s, settlers were moving on to the Canadian prairies, and miners were heading to the Kootenays and the Klondike. Vancouver's boom began in earnest as towns and mining camps provided new markets for goods. As the downtown's commercial centre moved west, a specialized warehouse district developed in Gastown, crowded between the CPR tracks along the waterfront and the retail shops lining Hastings Street.

On the north side of Water Street, the backsides of old warehouses still offer glimpses of loading docks opening onto the CPR tracks.

Wholesalers, like grocers Kelly Douglas and W.H. Malkin, took advantage of Vancouver's position at the meeting place between the railways and the trans-Pacific steamers. They imported coffee, tea and spices, which were stored in their Gastown warehouses, and repackaged for distribution throughout the province. By 1913 the Gastown area was so crowded with warehouses that a second warehouse district was established, near the CPR yards in Yaletown.

Vancouver's economic boom collapsed in 1914, and World War I delayed the recovery. By the 1920s when building resumed, most new commercial construction took place west of Gastown. A few warehouses were built or enlarged, however during the 1930s, '40s and '50s, Gastown, once the heart of Vancouver, became a virtual backwater. Warehousing shifted out of the downtown, moving to the suburbs where land was cheaper and highways close by. Hotels that had once catered to passengers from the railways and steamships deteriorated. Many hotels were converted into rooming houses, providing cheap lodgings for seasonal labourers and the city's long-term unemployed.

For Gastown, hard times and obscurity were a blessing in disguise. With little pressure for new development, street after street of brick and stone buildings from Vancouver's early years survived into the 1960s.

---

It was during the 1960s that business leaders, alarmed by competition from the suburbs began to plan for downtown redevelopment. A consortium of local and international companies planned "Project 200" for the Gastown area - it called for 36 high-rises and other smaller buildings to be constructed on a deck over the CPR tracks. But the recently completed Pacific Centre complex raised awareness of the impact of high-rise development on city views and social life. Furthermore, Project 200 depended on a waterfront link with a proposed freeway through Chinatown, which citizens successfully opposed. Finally, in 1968, the Community Arts Council, recognizing Gastown's special historical and architectural interest, organized walking tours through the district. Six hundred people took a fresh look at Gastown. What they saw motivated private developers to renovate and preserve individual buildings. The City and local property owners, seeing an opportunity to revitalize the entire area, funded the beautification of Maple Tree Square at Carrall and Water Streets. New street lamps and furniture were installed, and streets and sidewalks were resurfaced with brick pavers. In 1971 the Province designated both Gastown and Chinatown as historic districts.

Gastown's rejuvenation has been fueled by tourism and marketing strategies that highlight shops and restaurants located in the area's historical buildings. Gastown's resurgence can also be attributed to the conversion of several warehouse buildings to residential use along Alexander and Water Streets. This has led to an increase in the resident population, which bodes well for local businesses but has created tensions with long-term low-income residents.

## 1 Europe Hotel

*43 Powell Street*

Angelo Calori built his Europe Hotel in 1908-09 conveniently near the old steamship docks at the foot of Columbia Street. A bus transferred passengers to the hotel. Parr and Fee architects designed a "flat-iron shaped" building for this triangular-shaped lot. It is reputed to be the earliest reinforced concrete structure in Canada and the first fireproof hotel in western Canada. The building and the annex to the east were rehabilitated in 1983 to provide affordable housing units. Funding was provided by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and A. Ingre and Associates were the project architects. The lobby features elegant marble, brass, tile and glass work.



## 2 Captain French Building

*41 Alexander Street*

In recent years this entire block has seen a number of buildings converted to residential uses. The first of these at 41 Alexander was completed in 1991 and is known as the "Captain French", after the first owner of the building. Other renovations at 25, 27 and 73 Alexander followed soon after. 58 Alexander was renovated in 1992 to provide rooms for low-income residents. Street improvements that are in keeping with the developing residential character of this block were completed in 1996.



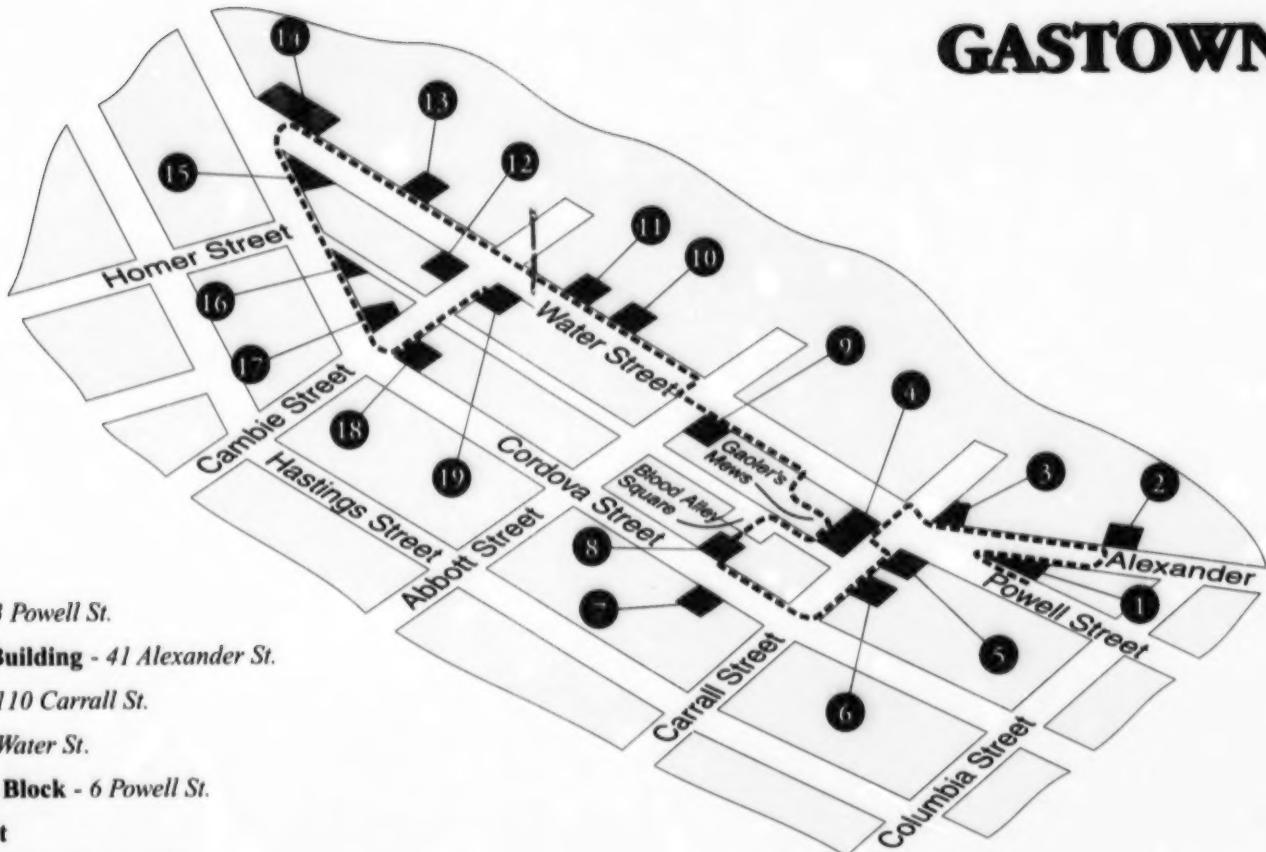
## 3 Dunn Building

*110 Carrall Street*

Built in 1898, this was one of many warehouses completed in Gastown during Vancouver's boom at the turn of the century. Former alderman Thomas Dunn retained architect N.S. Hoffar to design this structure to house a ship chandlery and hardware business. It was completed in time to profit from outfitting Klondike gold seekers. In those prosperous days, Dunn held a ball in the warehouse to celebrate the building's official opening.



# GASTOWN



## KEY

- 1 Europe Hotel - 43 Powell St.
- 2 Captain French Building - 41 Alexander St.
- 3 Dunn Building - 110 Carrall St.
- 4 Byrnes Block - 2 Water St.
- 5 Second Ferguson Block - 6 Powell St.
- 6 210 Carrall Street
- 7 Lonsdale Block - 8 West Cordova St.
- 8 Stanley Hotel - 36 Blood Alley Square
- 9 Dominion Hotel - 210 Abbott St.
- 10 Gaslight Square - 131 Water St.
- 11 First Malkin Warehouse - 139 Water St.
- 12 Edward Hotel - 302 Water St.
- 13 Hudson House - 321 Water St.
- 14 Kelly Building - 375 Water St.
- 15 Holland Block - 350 Water St.
- 16 Horne Block - 309 West Cordova St.
- 17 Masonic Temple - 301 West Cordova St.
- 18 Unitel Building - 175 West Cordova St.
- 19 Leckie Building - 220 Cambie St.